

# Ardagh and the Ardagh Chalice

THE name of the small West Limerick village of Ardagh is known not only to the people in all parts of Ireland but to people in many parts of the world.

The reason for this national and international fame of Ardagh is that it was here the beautiful Ardagh Chalice was discovered in 1868.

Ardagh is situated about three miles north of Newcastle West, on the road to Shanagolden and Foynes.

The main part of the village is stretched along a by-road running east from the Newcastle West-Shanagolden/Foynes road, so that strangers passing along the latter road are left with the impression that the village consists of no more than a couple of houses located at a crossroads.

## Field

According to Joyce (*Irish Names of Places*), the name Ardagh derives from *Ard Achadh*, the High Field. But the Placenames section of the Ordnance Survey now recommends *Ardach* as the Irish form of the name; this name would mean the Place of Heights or Hills.

While a large plain extends eastwards from Ardagh to Rathkeale, and beyond, a few miles west of it lies a high range of heathery hills, interspersed with extensive bogs and

moorlands. However, much of the land around Ardagh itself is very fertile.

About 150 yards south of the ruins of the old church of Ardagh there is a holy well dedicated to St. Molua; and Canon Begley, historian of the Diocese of Limerick, thought that in fact Molua may have founded a monastery there. Molua, who is believed to have been born somewhere in what is now Co. Limerick, established many monasteries, and sent a copy of his Rule to Pope Gregory the Great. He died in 623.

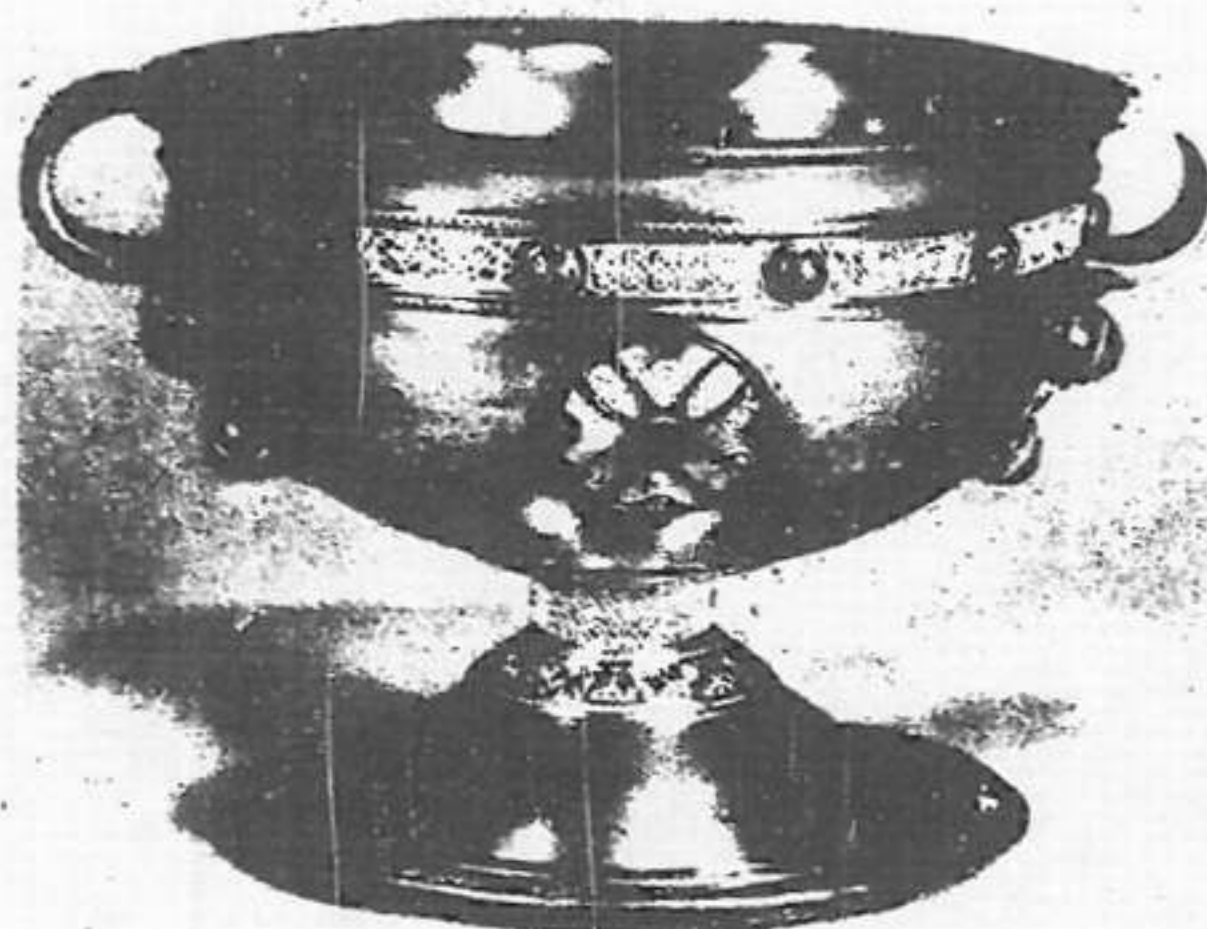
There was great devotion to St. Molua in Ardagh. He was the patron of the parish, and rounds were paid at his well on the 3rd of August, the eve of his feast day. The feast day itself was observed as a parish holiday.

Ardagh was an important centre in medieval times, and later. It was a manor of the Bishops of Limerick, who held extensive lands there; it also gave a name to a large cantred, or administrative district, in the early days of Norman control in West Limerick. A mill is noted as having been in existence there in 1298. It was one of the smaller medieval boroughs in Co. Limerick.

## Burgesses

Dr. Pat O'Connor (*Exploring Limerick's Past*, p. 18) is of the opinion that the centre had about 60

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The Ardagh Chalice.

burgesses and a population of at least 200 in the mid 14th century. In 1611 a patent was granted to William Cullum for the holding there of a weekly Monday market and an annual fair.

A Court Leet and a Court Baron were also held there. So it continued to be an important centre. Later, however, it was to be eclipsed by the development of Newcastle.

The Ardagh district has some claims to literary distinction. Daniel Sheehan of Ardagh was writing poetry in Irish at the beginning of

the 19th century; his output included an *Amhrá grá*, a love song, written in 1810. In 1837, according to Lewis (*Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*), the village of Ardagh consisted of "one long irregular street, containing 65 houses, which are in a very ruinous condition".

It then had three fairs, held on 11th May, 14th August and 21st November.

The Fenians made a brief attack on the local police barracks in 1867; but the happening that was to really put Ardagh on the map took place on a September day in 1868, when a man digging potatoes in a large earthen ring fort, on the Western edge of the village, discovered, about three feet down, a small wooden cross, and a collection of metal objects, including the famous Ardagh Chalice.

## Metals

The beautifully proportioned Ardagh Chalice is the finest example of eight-century metalwork ever to have come to light. It stands six inches high and is made of silver, bronze and gold, the design and decoration indicating technical proficiency of the highest order.

The book, *Treasures of Early Irish Art* (published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1977) says (p. 138), in connection with the chalice, that "a wide range of materials have been combined to create a work of perfection".

It goes on: "The silver bowl, provided with handles for lifting, is linked by a gilded collar to a conical silver foot, made more stable by a broad horizontal flange . . . on the chalice, where decoration is used, it is sumptuous."

Ultimate La Tene scrolls, plain interlace, plaits and frets abound. The techniques employed are engraving, casting, filigree, colsonné and enamelling. Below the horizontal band of gold filigree on the bowl the names of the Apostles in shining metal stand out in a sea of stippling."

The Ardagh Chalice is one of the most treasured exhibits in the National Museum in Dublin, and in recent years it has gone on exhibition to the United States and to Germany.

The other objects, apart from the wooden cross, found with the chalice, were a bronze brooch and a bronze cup. The cross, which was eight inches long, bore a figure of Christ, and had the date 1727 cut on it; the collection of objects must therefore have been hidden in the fort some time subsequent to that date.

## Priest

Canon Begley thinks that they may have belonged to a Fr. Bermingham, who was parish priest of Ardagh some time prior to 1736, but who had to fly from the parish because of the attentions of some anti-Catholic magistrates in the district.

In the days of religious persecution in Ireland, valuable ecclesiastical treasures were often entrusted to custodians, to be passed on from generation to generation.

Ardagh was the birthplace of William C. Upton, author of *Uncle Pat's Cabin*, a book calculated to focus attention on the plight

of the small Irish tenant farmer and farm labourer, as Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had focused attention on the plight of the Southern Negro.

And a modern Irish poet and novelist, Eithne Strong (née O'Connell), hails from the Carrickerry district, about two miles north-west of Ardagh.

In 1981 aerial photography revealed a remarkable hilltop fort a little over a mile north-west of Ardagh. The fort, the largest ring fort so far known in Ireland, is situated at an elevation of 797 feet and covers 52 acres.

There are other places of interest within a short distance of Ardagh. Glenastar has a small mature oak woodland in a wet, steep-sided valley, a surviving fragment of the great oak forests that once covered all this countryside. Here too is an attractive waterfall.

And there is Cahermoyne House, to the north-east of Ardagh. This was the home of the Young Irishman, William Smith O'Brien, who led the Rising in Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary, in 1848; it is now an Oblate Novitiate.

Today, Ardagh's principal street, with its interestingly broken street line, leads from the crossroads to the Catholic church.

To the right, as you enter the church, is the recumbent Irish-inscribed stone covering the grave of Fr. Micheál Ó hAodha, P.P. of Ardagh, 1930-34, and one of the two Co. Limerick priests whom the British General Maxwell asked Bishop O'Dwyer to discipline after the 1916 Rising, because of their nationalist activities, only to receive that historic rebuff from the bishop. Ardagh's thriving joinery works is on the Newcastle West road.

Ardagh station operates no more. Things come and things go. But what will never go from Ardagh is the proud distinction of having its name associated for all time with one of the most beautiful works of art ever produced by the hand of man.

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